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THE ABKHASIAN NAME OF THE SUPREME BEING

By SIMON JANASHIA

[A translation of the article published in Georgian in *Dselidsdauli*—The Year Book, of the Georgian Philological Society, Tiflis, 1923–4, vol. i–ii, pp. 69–73.]

IT was Uslar who first observed that the Abkhasian name of the Supreme Being was in the plural.[1] He even quotes an example, i.e. *antsʷa dəuk'ʷa*,* the great God, lit. (*les*) *dieux grands*, in which the appearance of the adjective in the plural definitely testifies that, in the conception of the speaker, the ancient religious ideas—according to which God was not of one, but of many parts—were still in existence. The author remarks " only heathen Abkhasians say this ", the Chirstian and Muhammadan Abkhasians conceiving God quite definitely as the One, absolute Being.

Such an assertion was, perhaps, an excusable mistake on the part of the distinguished linguist, who was an orthodox Christian. It is impossible to divide the Abkhasians into such groups on the basis of their religious beliefs, despite the fact that formally they belong either to the Christian Church or to Islam. The example quoted by Uslar is probably one of those fortuitous discoveries whereby there suddenly emerges from the routine of ordinary usage a product of the national-spiritual creativeness belonging to the depths of the remote past.

Later, the same opinion (about the plural form) was put forward by Dcharaia[2] and Janashia.[3] The latter, however, thought that the word in question may have originated from the same *an*-root which in Abkhasian denotes the *mother*-notion.

Professor Marr shares only the first part of this view: he writes,[4] " . . . of great interest is the word *an*, god, which, in Abkhasian, appears usually as the plurale tantum *antsʷa*, God, lit. ' gods '."

In the summer of 1921, while in Abkhasia, in the village Adzvibzha (in Abzhua, the Kodor district), where I was sent by the Tiflis State University on a philological research study, I was able to collect certain data which threw more light on the question, as will be seen.

In the course of my research work, I was able to establish the validity of the formation of the word in question by the discovery

* For the pronunciation of *ʷ* and *ʲ*, see p. 118, n. *, and p. 131, n. *. (Translator's note.)

[1] Uslar, P. K., *The Abkhasian Language* (in Russian). Tiflis, 1887, p. 78.

[2] Dcharaia, P., *On the Relation of the Abkhasian Language to the Japhetic Languages*, in *Materials for Japhetic Linguistics* (in Russian), St. Petersburg, 1912, vol. iv, pp. 31–3.

[3] Janashia, N., *The Religious Beliefs of the Abkhasians*, in *The Christian East* (in Russian), St. Pb., 1915, vol. iv, issue i, pp. 74–5. [See the English translation in this number, pp. 118–9. ED.]

[4] Marr, N., *From a Linguistic Journey to Abkhasia* in *Izvestiya* (Bulletin) of the Imperial Academy of Sciences (in Russian), St. Pb., 1913, vol. vii, No. 6, p. 518.

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of an analogical formation in a *sh*-root- (= creating, to create, whence the verbal noun *ashará*) word *ashatswá*, which represents an epithet of a deity, and is equivalent to Georgian *gamtcheni*, creator.[1] I have not heard this word used apart from its association with the word God. This root is usually used in its past-participle form. A popular Abkhasian expression is *antswá-hazsház*, Creator God, but the following phrases are also in common use:—*ashatswá irshaz*, by the Creator (lit. creators') created (said of something very pleasing), and *ashatswá irmshaz*, by the Creator (lit., creators') not created (said of something unpleasing). In these examples *ashatswá* is understood to be in the plural, which is unmistakably borne out by the pronominal particle r (*i-r-shaz*, *i-r-mshaz*) which indicates the plurality of the subject (the determinative word in our examples).

It may, however, be argued that the phrases just quoted are composite, and that the particle indicated, a fossilized morphe which has lost its meaning. We will therefore quote another phrase, *nas ashatswá irshàma art'*, "Is it possible that the Creator (lit. creators) created these?" (it was said of the animals), in which *ashatswá* is directly represented as the subject in the plural. This word, and the notion conveyed by it, must have simultaneously undergone the same metamorphosis as the basic name itself, i.e., they must have lost first the intrinsic and then the formal meaning; it became a simple plurale tantum, for instance, in the widely used name for a kind of sacrificial animal, *ashatswá-dzatwə*, the Creator's (lit. creators') sacrificial animal, in which we should have had, in accordance with the rules of the Abkhasian compound word-formation, the form *ashatswá-rdzatwə*. . . .

It is clear that in this case the result of the acute conflict between old and new ideas, and in connection with it, between dead and living forms, is far less definite than in the case of *antswá* itself. The changes to which the latter has been subjected have been more rapid; but nevertheless, owing to language inertia, we find facts which reveal the original meaning of the process of word-formation. One such fact, quoted by Uslar, is given above. Of no less interest, in my opinion, is an example I found: the heroine of a story which I noted down, bears the following name, *antswá rt'əp'hà khánkwla*, that is "God (‖ gods)-their-daughter-Khakula" in other words, the god's daughter Khàkûla (Khàkûla being a girl's name). The same pronominal particle r (*r-t'əp'hà*) explicitly indicates here that for the remote ancestors of the speaker, God represented the union of numerous forces.[2]

[1] In Megrelian, *odabade*. See Janashia, *The Abkhasian Cult and Mode of Life* (in Russian) in *The Christian East*, St. Pb., 1916, vol. v, issue 3, p. 168. Also Marr, *On the Religious Beliefs of the Abkhasians* (in Russian) in *The Christian East*, vol. iv, issue 1, p. 132.

[2] See also Dcharaia, op. cit., p. 32.

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Finally, it has already been noted[1] that this peculiar religious conception—in accordance with which, not only the supreme beings of the national pantheon, but even the elements (personified, of course), are forces of many parts, each one endowed with its own particular aspect, with its separate parts, must have been common to all the Georgian tribes proper. Thus, for instance, in the Summer of 1921, I heard, in the village Eredvi (in the district of Gori) the following expression:—*mashin gagvidsqra tchveni dsili ghmert'i*, "Then our part of god was angry with us"; and this year, in Tiflis, I overheard in the street:—*bnelashi ver vitsani, ai, ase venatsvale tchem dsil ghmert's*, "I did not recognize (him or it) in the dark, I swear by my part of God."

[1] Janashia, *The Religious Beliefs of the Abkhasians*, p. 75. [English translation, p. 118. Ed.] Expressions such as "my part of God", "my part of the Icon", are quite common among the Abkhasians. Of interest, in this connection, is the curse *ámtsa-khe tsmad*, "may thy part of fire burn out." According to Mr. Marghania (Maan), the Shepherds in Abkhasa, when grazing their sheep in the mountains, pray to the Marshania-s' part of God (*Marshyánaa rmtsvakhue*, because the guardian-god of these mountains is supposed to be the god (or part of god) of the Marshania *gvari*.